

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-3

WASHINGTON POST
22 April 1984

Covert War in Central America Troubles a Hill GOP Overseer

By Charles R. Babcock
Washington Post Staff Writer

During the summer of 1975, David F. Durenberger, an executive for a St. Paul, Minn., company that did considerable business selling paints and plastics in Central America, received a letter from his 12-year-old son, who was spending part of the summer in El Salvador.

"He talked about the disparity between rich and poor, about a 250-pound cop with a machine gun," Durenberger recalled. "It's so obvious when you go through those countries. You'll see something, their version of a modern shopping center, and go off the edge of the parking lot and there's a ravine and people living on the side of a hill with no running water."

Durenberger, a Republican from Minnesota who was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1978 to complete the unexpired term of Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey, said his business experience in Central America during the 1970s made him a strong supporter of long-range economic aid as a solution to that region's turmoil.

But as a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Durenberger has had to grapple for more than two years with troubling short-term proposals: the Reagan administration's covert war against the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

The recent exposure of the CIA's direct involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors has undercut congressional support for funding the secret war and raised new questions about the performance of the two congressional intelligence committees that were established to oversee the activities of the CIA.

Thus Durenberger finds himself being questioned about a secret war that isn't secret anymore. It is clear from a series of recent interviews that the moderate Republican has become increasingly frustrated by the administration's policy in Central America.

After opposing it earlier, he voted for funding the covert war for the first time last fall, but is trying to get Congress involved more directly in determining the policy. He mentions the "discomfort" he feels when Republican colleagues challenge his patriotism and that of others who ask questions about administration proposals.

Durenberger said President Reagan believes he can easily rally public support for his Central-American policies.

"He says, 'All I've got to do is go on television. I don't worry about the American public, because I know if I go on television and tell them, like I did on Grenada, remember how I went and turned the whole thing around?' So if push comes to shove in Central America he'll just go on television with his charts and pictures and have them eating out of his hand."

Dealing with the moral and pragmatic questions of attempting to oversee a secret war is more difficult from Durenberger's perspective. "When you put your objectives in the hands of someone else with a very different set of objectives and then hand him a rifle, you're just asking for it," he said.

Durenberger criticized U.N. Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick's statements that the United States should not unilaterally abide by international law while rivals flaunt it. "That's an eye for an eye. That's the Israeli way, the Libyan way, the Iranian way . . . The ends justify the means. That's a whole philosophy that America has disowned throughout our history," he said.

He doesn't feel, though, that the administration is using the same "eye-for-an-eye" rationale in the covert war against Nicaragua.

"They are interdicting, trying to hold the land. Some people are dying. That can be justified as a civil war that would have happened anyway. And theoretically we aren't doing it just to kill people. We are doing it for a political objective, which is to get the Sandinistas to agree to the original goals of their revolution."

Durenberger said he went to the Senate with a background that included training as an Army counterintelligence specialist in the 1950s and training at a Catholic college "totally dedicated to fighting world communism."

But he opposed funding for the covert war at first because he felt that the people of Nicaragua would turn on the Sandinistas without outside help. "I felt the only thing that would keep the people from turning on them was for us to appear to be turning on the revolution and that is, in effect, what happened with the covert action."

He also acknowledges that a review of his record on Central America "looks like I've been on all sides of this thing."

As a newcomer to the Senate in 1979, he was one of the few Republicans to support President Carter's plan to send aid to Nicaragua. And though he opposed the covert funding in the Intelligence Committee's secret votes in the spring of 1982, he supported President Reagan's policies during his own reelection campaign that fall.

A year ago, he said, he was so concerned by the vague objectives of the covert operations that he went to see William P. Clark, then Reagan's national security affairs adviser, and warned the administration that he would propose ending the secret aid. He did so. But when the administration came up with a new "finding" to justify the program last September, Durenberger voted in favor of it for the first time.

Continued